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Response to *The Canterbury Tales*

Folktales are generally seen to be lessons and morals wrapped into entertaining stories that are able to reach a wide audience because of their oral transmission. *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer is a collection of tales that was adapted from known folktales, and, like the folktales he draws from, his adaptations work to provide lessons and morals. However, the difference between Chaucer's tales and the folktales he draws from is the amount of religious elements he adds to them. A number of his narratives go off on what can be seen as religious lectures or sermons, which is more noticeable when compared to the folktales. Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" is one of his tales in which religious elements become a major addition and part of the story, and when compared to "Three Friends and a Treasure," a folktale with a similar theme, this religious aspect is even more pronounced. "The Pardoner's Tale" and "Three Friends and a Treasure" are both about a group of thieves who steal treasure and eventually kill each other in their hopes to keep the money for themselves. When comparing Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" and the folktale "Three Friends and a Treasure," it is evident that Chaucer adds in more religious elements that change the folktales' portrayal of the moral of the story as a universal fate or justice acting upon the thieves for their greed to God's punishment for sinning.

The introduction of religious elements in "The Pardoner's Tale" happens in the prologue through the use of having the Pardoner tell the tale. The Pardoner himself is a religious figure,

and in the prologue to the tale he tells his audience that he tricks people into giving him money by preaching to them and promising to absolve them of their sins:

“Of avarice and of swich cursednesse  
 Is al my preching, for to make hem free  
 To yeve hir pens, and namely unto me.  
 For min entente is nat but for to winne,  
 And nothing for correccioun of sinne.” (Chaucer 453-454)

The character of the Pardoner simultaneously introduces religion and also the subject of the lesson that the story will attempt to teach: greed. The Pardoner tells the audience that his theme is “*radix malorum est cupiditas*” or “the root of evil is greed,” and he exemplifies this in himself and in his tale (Chaucer 451). The Pardoner’s addition to the story emphasizes the sin of greed because, as a man of the church, he is supposed to represent goodness or godliness. The introduction of sin to the story allows for the thieves murder of each other for sole ownership of the money to be their punishment for sinning. On the other hand, “Three Friends and a Treasure” does not have a narrator because of the oral tradition it originated from. This story is a culmination of an unknowable amount of people telling the story again and again. Since there is no one narrator like The Pardoner, there is no one to point out that the thieves are committing sin, nor is there anyone to give a sermon about the sin of greed like the Pardoner does. Rather than being punished through the idea of God as provided by the Christian religion, the punishment of the thieves comes from a universal justice or karma, which can be felt in the last line of the folktale: “The three found the money and died through their own hands and thoughts without sharing a brass farthing out of the huge sum” (45). The phrase “through their own

hands” exudes the sentiment that it was their own fault and they got what they deserved because of it, indicating karmic justice at work.

After the prologue, “The Pardoner’s Tale” starts with the narrator giving a lecture on greed and the sins of gluttony, drunkenness, gambling, and swearing that will be used to characterize the thieves that the story is about. The Pardoner says that the men “drinke over hir might,” that they were given to “riot, hasard, stewes, and tavernes,” and that their oaths were “so grete and so dampnable / That it is grisly for to heere hem swere” (Chaucer 456). The Pardoner then goes off on these different sins and gives a sermon in the middle of the story about how each of the sins are deplorable. The effect of characterizing the young men by the sins he claims are damnable is that it makes the consequences of the thieves’ actions seem to be a result of sinning. They kill one another in order to keep the money for themselves, and the Pardoner’s lesson is that God will punish sinners for their “cursed sinne of alle cursednesse” (Chaucer 471). However, “Three Friends and a Treasure” takes a more moralistic approach rather than one based on religion and sin. There is no added sermon in this story to teach the reader (or listener) about the heinousness of sin and what happens when you commit sins. The wickedness of the men’s thievery is instead portrayed by their knowledge that they are committing a crime and doing the bad deed in spite of that. In the folktale, after the men have stolen the money, one of the men proposes to another member of the group to kill the third member of the group in order to keep the money for themselves. The man at first refuses, but the proposer presses “him to take part in the brutal act, assuring him that no one would know it and telling him a number of things they could do with such a large amount of money” and the man eventually relents (44-45). The third man also goes back and forth with himself on whether he should kill the other two, even

admitting that “this would be murder” and that “it would be a blood guilt,” but he still kills the two men (45). Without sin being the reason for punishment, the punishment becomes an effect of their crime or, simply, karma.

In conclusion, both “The Pardoner’s Tale” and “Three Friends and a Treasure” teach a lesson about how people are punished for their greed. However, “The Pardoner’s Tale” slightly changes the moral of the story by presenting greed as a sin. The moral is altered then to show that people who sin are punished, and, in this instance, that sin is greed. Since the folktale does not add in the element of the Christian idea of sin, the moral of the story remains that people are punished for their greed. It also changes who does the punishing, whereas the punisher of sin is God, while the punisher of just committing bad deeds, like that of greed (and its consequences), is the universe or karma. It is evident, then, that Chaucer’s addition of religious elements like sin and the Pardoner changes the portrayal of the moral of the story.